

## Stingray Point History and Geography

The Stingray Point Chesapeake bay interpretive buoy sits just East South East of the point itself right between the mouths of the Rappahannock and Piankatank rivers. You can visualize the geography of this area by thinking of how it looked at the end of the last ice age, say, 15,000 years ago when sea level on earth was about 330 feet lower than it is today. At that time, what would become Stingray point was a ridge about 350 feet high that stood between the channels of these two rivers that Smith named after the tribes he found there. Where the rivers meet the collision of currents over the centuries has caused sediment to settle out, gradually building up mud and sand to form a bar at the tip of the ridge. As sea level rose tidal water flooded the river mouths and the Eastern end of the ridge. Scientists estimate that when Captain John Smith and his crew visited the area on July 17th, 1608 sea level was about four feet lower than it is today. So it is possible that the point extended out nearly to the current site of Stingray Point light about half mile inside the buoy. It is highly likely that in 1608 the shoals around the point were growing a dense mixture of the Chesapeake's two high salinity underwater bay grasses, eel grass and widgeon grass which attracted the fish that the captain, as he said, "Sported" himself by spearing with his sword. In July they could well have been a mixture of Norfolk spot, Atlantic croakers, Speckled trout, Rock fish, Sheepshead and flounder, as well of course, as the infamous stingray. That was probably a southern stingray judging by the captain's description of it's having it's spine set on the middest part of its' tail. Unlike the cow nose rays more common today, whose spines lay at the bases of their tails.

Unfortunately, under water grass beds began to disappear from Stingray point shoals in the 1970's, due to loss of water clarity caused by nitrogen and sediment pollution. Today there is very little, though sparse beds grow in most years on the opposite sides of the river mouths around Mosquito creek and Windmill point to the North and Cherry point, on Gwynn's island to the South. Outside the shoals narrow shelves of firm sand and mud bottom grew abundant oysters in Smith's time providing excellent deeper water habitat to compliment the shallow grass beds. Today they too are gone, though reef restoration projects in both the

Rappahannock and the Piankatank have begun to turn the population around after a century and a half of over harvest, pollution and disease decimated it. Beyond the Stingray point buoy to the East lies the great Rappahannock shoal, an area of 30 to 45 foot deep water extending all the way across the Eastern shore, and lying between deep channels to the North and the South. The shoal is shallow enough that the port of Baltimore has for years maintained the narrow arrow straight, 50 foot deep cut channel through it to provide a passage for deep draft ships headed up or back down the bay. This is big water about 14 miles across. A great place to contemplate the huge variety of habitats and geography that make up the Chesapeake bay. Because this buoy is placed in such a strategic lower bay location, it's real time information on conditions of the water should be especially useful to anyone out there if they are in a boat, or planning to go out whether waterman, recreational angler, or cruising boater.